**Roosevelt’s Square Deal**

At the dawn of the twentieth century, America was at a crossroads. Presented with abundant opportunity, but also hindered by significant internal and external problems, the country was seeking leaders who could provide a new direction. The political climate was ripe for reform, and the stage was set for the era of the Progressive Presidents, beginning with Republican Theodore Roosevelt.

Teddy Roosevelt was widely popular due to his status as a hero of the Spanish-American War and his belief in “speaking softly and carrying a big stick.” Taking over the presidency in 1901 after the assassination of William McKinley, he quickly assured America that he would not take any drastic measures. He then demanded a “Square Deal” that would address his primary concerns for the era—the three C’s: control of corporations, consumer protection, and conservation.

The ownership of corporations and the relationship between owners and laborers, as well as government’s role in the relationship, were the contentious topics of the period. Workers were demanding greater rights and protection, while corporations expected labor to remain cheap and plentiful. This conflict came to a head in 1902, with the anthracite coal strike in Pennsylvania. Coal mining was dirty and dangerous work, and 140,000 miners went on strike and demanded a 20 percent pay increase and a reduction in the workday from ten to nine hours. The mine owners were unsympathetic and refused to negotiate with labor representatives. With the approach of winter the dwindling coal supply began to cause concern throughout the nation.

Roosevelt, going against established precedent, decided to step in. He summoned the mine owners and union representatives to meet with him in Washington. Roosevelt was partly moved by strong public support and took the side of the miners. Still, the mine owners were reluctant to negotiate until Roosevelt, threatening to use his “big stick,” declared that he would seize the mines and operate them with federal troops. Owners reluctantly agreed to arbitration, where the striking workers received a 10 percent pay increase and a nine-hour working day. This was the first time a president sided with unions in a labor dispute, and it helped cement Roosevelt’s reputation as a friend of the common people and gave his administration the nickname “The Square Deal.”

Emboldened by this success and in pursuit of the first element of his Square Deal, Roosevelt began to attack large, monopolistic corporations. Some trusts were effective and legitimate, but many of these companies engaged in corrupt and preferential business practices. In 1902, the Northern Securities Company, owned by J.P. Morgan and James J. Hill, controlled most of the railroads in the northwestern United States and intended to create a total monopoly. Roosevelt initiated legal proceedings against Northern Securities and eventually the Supreme Court ordered that the company be dissolved. Roosevelt’s radical actions angered big business and earned him the reputation of a “trust buster,” despite the fact that his successors Taft and Wilson actually dissolved more trusts.

In 1903, with urging from Roosevelt, Congress created the Department of Commerce and Labor (DOCL). This cabinet-level department was designed to monitor corporations and ensure that they engaged in fair business practices. The Bureau of Corporations was created under the DOCL to benefit consumers by monitoring interstate commerce, helping dissolve monopolies, and promoting fair competition between companies. In 1913, the DOCL was split into two separate entities, the Department of Commerce and the Department of Labor, both of which continue to play an important role in regulating business today.

The railroad business continued to be one of the most powerful and influential industries. Like many companies of the time, railroad companies engaged in corrupt business practices such as rebating and price fixing. Roosevelt encouraged Congress to take action to address these abuses, and in 1903 they passed the Elkins Act, which levied heavy fines on companies that engaged in illegal rebating. In 1906, they passed the Hepburn Act, which greatly strengthened the Interstate Commerce Commission. This law allowed the Commission to set maximum rates, inspect a company’s books, and investigate railroads, sleeping car companies, oil pipelines, and other transportation firms. This was a bold action by Roosevelt and Congress given the transportation industry was a powerful lobbyist and a significant political contributor.

The second element of Roosevelt’s Square Deal was consumer protection. In the early 1900s, there was little regulation of the food or drugs that were available to the public. In 1906, Upton Sinclair published a book called The Jungle that described in graphic detail the Chicago slaughterhouse industry. Sinclair intended for his book to expose the plight of immigrant workers and possibly bring readers to the Socialist movement, but people were instead shocked and sickened by the practices of the meat industry.

Roosevelt had the power to do something about the horrors described in The Jungle. He immediately appointed a special investigating committee to look into food handling practices in Chicago. Their report confirmed much of what Sinclair had written. Roosevelt was shocked by the report and predicted that it could have a devastating effect on American meat exports. He agreed to keep it quiet on the condition that Congress would take action to address the issues.

After much pressure from Roosevelt, Congress reluctantly agreed to pass the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. Many members of Congress were reluctant to pass these laws, as the meat industry was a powerful lobbying force. However, the passage of this legislation helped prevent the adulteration and mislabeling of food, alcohol, and drugs. It was an important first step toward ensuring that Americans were buying safe and healthy products. Eventually, the meatpacking industry welcomed these reforms, as they found that a government seal of approval would help increase their export revenues.

The final element of Roosevelt’s Square Deal was conservation. Roosevelt was widely known as a sportsman, hunter, and outdoorsman, and he had a genuine love and respect for nature. However, many Americans of the time viewed the country’s natural resources as limitless. For example, many farmers, ranchers, and timber companies in the west were consuming a huge portion of the available resources at an alarming rate. Their primary obsession was profit, and they had little concern for the damage they were causing. However, there was a small but vocal population who had a great deal of concern for the environment. Fortunately for them and for future Americans, the environmentalists had a friend in Teddy Roosevelt.

Environmentalism and conservation were not new ideas, but most had not been concerned with ecological issues. While a number of laws had been passed to prevent or limit the destruction of natural resources, the majority of this legislation was not enforced or lacked the teeth necessary to make a significant difference.

With Roosevelt’s urging, Congress passed the Newlands Act of 1902. This legislation allowed the federal government to sell public lands in the arid, desert western states and devote the proceeds to irrigation projects. Landowners would then repay part of the irrigation costs from the proceeds they received from their newly fertile land, and this money was earmarked for more irrigation projects. Eventually, dozens of dams were created in the desert including the massive Roosevelt Dam on Arizona’s Salt River.

Another major concern of environmentalists was the devastation of the nation’s timberlands. By 1900, only about 25 percent of the huge timber preserves were still standing. Roosevelt set aside 125 million acres of timberlands as federal reserves, over three times the amount preserved by all of his predecessors combined. He also performed similar actions with coal and water reserves, thus guaranteeing the preservation of some natural resources for future generations. Environmentalists such as John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, and the upstart Sierra Club aided Roosevelt in his efforts. Preserving America’s natural resources and calling attention to the desperate need for conservation may well have been Teddy Roosevelt’s greatest achievement as President, and his most enduring legacy.

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